

Happy Valentine's Day everyone!! I hope that this letter finds you full of love and resting in the arms of our gracious, loving, and ever-present Father. This week has been an especially important time to tell the loved ones in my life, new and old, that I appreciate them and am so very thankful for their love and relationships, which of course includes you!!! ☺

We had a great day today at work...we had a mini Valentine's Day party for the kids, and we weren't even aware that it was going to take place until this afternoon. One of my co-workers has a church group that is coming down this summer to assist with our elementary summer day camp. They decided to surprise the kids today with a huge box filled with Valentine's Day goodies to let them know that they are already loved by this church group. The box included stickers, doilies, and cardstock paper for the children to make Valentines for their loved ones. It was so much fun seeing the joy on the kids' faces when we opened the surprise box and when they made their precious Valentines.

Ever since I've gotten down here, my heart has been touched by these kids I work with day in and day out. I've especially been drawn to a particular family, the Deliscas. There is a sad story, but it's full of hope. There are nine adorable children (five of whom live at home): Peterson (19), Harolson (17), Shelove (12) Mario (11), Olson (9), Chris (6), and Jimmyson (5). This family lost their mother just a few years ago to sickness when the youngest boy was still a baby. Their father has been left to care for all of his children both physically and emotionally all by himself. Sometimes the father is working so hard to put food in their stomachs and clothes on their backs that he isn't able to support them as well emotionally as he would like to. He, like many of the parents of the children I work with, rides a bus down for two hours to the Florida Keys everyday to work in a hotel on the islands. Even after all of the trauma these children have been through, they are still so vibrant and full of joy and laughter. The four youngest boys come to our after-school program one day a week, and I get the privilege of taking them home every Wednesday. I love being around them and getting to see their personalities shine. Mario is my special friend since I discovered that he's a Clemson Tiger fan. Shelove is in my CPR (Close Personal Relationship) and is so much fun to be around. Today we just had a blast riding around in the van taking the boys home with the oldest two beating out a rap on the windows of the van and the youngest ones rapping right along. Please pray for their brother, Harolson, as he has been in and out of jail recently, twice since I've gotten here in September. His heart is in the right place with God, but his actions don't always follow suit with that, unfortunately, but we're praying that his last recent trip to jail has woken him up for real this time.

Last Saturday we had a yard sale as a fundraiser for teen summer camps. We didn't raise as much as we had hoped for, but every little bit helps, and we trust that God will provide because God always does! Sunday we also had a Valentine's Day lasagna luncheon, which was fun and successful for both the observers and the workers (even though it was hard work!). We have four opportunities for our teens to go to camp this summer, and we are praying that the Lord will send the right kids to camp who need that mountain-top experience the most.

Two weekends ago now I had the opportunity to go to Tampa for a Lutheran youth workers convention and promote DOOR (the Mennonite-based partner organization for the PCUSA Young Adult Volunteer Program) to the various youth leaders. I also got to attend several useful and inspiring workshops that were very applicable to my work (Bible Studies, group games, and advanced relationships). Three of us volunteers and our site coordinator, Heidi, spent the weekend together at the Hyatt and had such a wonderful time bonding with each other, new acquaintances, and the Lord. What a blessing!

Enjoy these pictures below!! Much love and many prayers, Erin

Some of my kids from the elementary after-school program (Christmas party):



Allison (housemate & volunteer), me, & some of our kids at the Homestead rodeo:



Olson (seated, front), Chris, Kevin (standing), & Jimmyson (seated, back):

